

# **How to Tame Customer Crackpots, Bullies, & Radicals on Social Media**

by Chip R. Bell

Southern politicians often have a homespun way of making a point. A few years ago a candidate in a small town sheriff's election was overheard saying, "Criticize my drawl, you make me laugh; criticize my views; you make me listen; but, criticize my mama, and you're asking for a fight."

Customer militants come in various forms. There are the customer crackpots with an ancient ax to grind; bullies only courageous on the unidentified Internet, and radicals seeking a platform for an extreme point of view. When you or your organization is the target of their irreverent, inappropriate, and unfair poison, they can create major mayhem in the manner they shape opinion. Were this a real neighborhood, their views would be discounted as "babblings of a fool" and carry zero credibility or influence. However, the anonymity of the Internet removes the capacity for any sort of character check. And, their toxic nuttiness can do you damage. Sometimes the better part of valor is to simply ignore their caustic critique as too weird to comment. But, there is a line over which they step when they "criticize your mama."

John Kerry lost the presidential bid against George Bush some say because he waited too late to comment on the allegations of a group of highly resourced Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. The group of Vietnam vets, no doubt angered by Kerry's anti-war actions and testimony before congress, claimed Lt. Kerry was less of a battle hero than he claimed and was grandstanding and exaggerating some thought to pad a resume in preparation of someday running for public office. Kerry initially ignored the attack ads. By the time he finally spoke up, it was too late. The group had already tarnished beyond recovery his reputation as a man without integrity.

## **Decide where the "criticize your mama" line will be**

But, also decide how quickly the "fire alarm" bell will provoke action. What erroneous, ill-founded comments will erode the integrity of your brand? What do you hear standing in the grocery line when others see you nametag? Customers admire service providers who care enough about their reputation to fight the good fight. You cannot remain silent. But, fight fiction with facts; meet hysteria with confidence. The more customers witness your passion rather than your anger, the more your intervention will be viewed as a mark of marketplace character, not as a defensive gesture trying to duck the spotlight.

**Solicit friends and advocates to join in the fight with you.**

Never assume the motive of your opponent...this not a battle of reason. Focus instead on what you stand for and concrete examples of your stance. In today's wired world delay allows the viral effect to spread like wildfire. One hour in cyber-time is the equivalent of one month in snail mail time. Speed of response is your friend in quelling the influence and reach of the adversary.

It may be appropriate to use multiple channels. A major snafu on JetBlue triggered the use of e-mails and letters to key customers, ad in major newspapers, and public appearances by senior leaders. Every public relations channel available was used to quell the sobering effect of a group of "customers from hell" seeking to bring down the airline quickly over a major misstep. Compare that with the recent United Airlines hiccup with viral video of a passenger being dragged from the plane.

**If there is a kernel of truth in the mean spirited missal being fired at you, acknowledge it candidly and quickly.**

If some of the claims about Kerry had held a modicum of truth, he could have promptly stated, "I was a 26 year-old cocky lieutenant who wanted my share of the glory. However, there was nothing false about my being in harm's way in a heavily booby trapped war zone regardless of the medals it yielded." He would have likely disarmed his opponents and been able to change the agenda from undeserved heroism in an unpopular war thirty-five years earlier to the present day issues the campaign was suppose to be about. Candor and urgency are valued allies in the war against propaganda.

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